

## "Away from the Flagpole," There Are Rewards and Frustrations

# AC/RC Assignments: One Officer's Perspective

by Major Kevin B. Marcus

For many soldiers, duty with the Reserve Components has become more than just an option. Congressional mandates have made AC/RC assignment a foregone conclusion for many officers and senior noncommissioned officers. This trend will likely continue in the future; as our reserve components play a larger role in the Total Army, the active component's personnel commitment to them will certainly remain significant. The good news is that an AC/RC tour is a worthwhile experience for any active component soldier. This article will describe the benefits and frustrations of an AC/RC tour in an attempt to provide an overview for those soldiers pending assignment to AC/RC duty.

Relatively little is known about an AC/RC assignment. Branch representatives can usually tell you where you'll be working, and for which major command (i.e., FORSCOM vs. TRADOC), but little more. TOE battalion/brigade commanders (who were captains in an era of few AC/RC assignments) usually have few insights into the duties and responsibilities of the job. While I am far from an expert, my almost two years in an AC/RC assignment provided some insights. I should first mention that there are many different types of AC/RC assignments out there, in literally hundreds of locations. I'm assigned as a training/operations officer in an ARNG TASS (Officer Candidate School) battalion. My specific job notwithstanding, many of my experiences are universal and are worthwhile to pass on.

Probably the single most important benefit of an AC/RC tour is the exposure to the reserve component environment. As does any unit, both Guard and Reserve units have their own languages, missions, and cultures. Learning to appreciate that provides the AC soldier with valuable insights into an increasingly important part of the Total Army.

The first "unique" aspect you'll learn to appreciate is the importance of time, and how it constrains RC training and readiness. RC units train collectively 39 days a year. Of these 39 days, 24 days are spent

during monthly "drill" periods, which usually focus on individual/crew training. Only 14 days are focused on collective training at platoon/company or higher level. Time is the largest constraint in the RC environment; there's only so much you can achieve in a weekend. Your success in large part depends on your ability to realize RC capabilities; you must understand what they are really able to accomplish in a time-constrained environment.

Next is the unique "dual nature" of the Army National Guard. As most of us know, the Guard is under state control when not activated. Their commander-in-chief is their governor. Although they receive the lion's share of their funding through federal budgeting; their day-to-day activities are driven by state, not federal, chains of command. You must understand their sense of "self"; the ARNG is justifiably proud of its dual mission. However, we all must realize that the AC soldier is assigned there to promote the primacy of their federal, war-fighting mission.

Within both Guard and Reserve units, there's a curious division between "M Day" or "traditional" soldiers and full-time unit support personnel. "M Day" or "traditional" soldiers are those who have civilian jobs/careers and drill once a month and two weeks a year, although many (especially those in leadership positions) will put in more time. Full-time unit support personnel are, as the title suggests, full-timers. They are a combination of Active Guard/Reserve (AGR) soldiers or federal (GS) technicians who maintain membership in a Guard/Reserve unit. The majority of command positions are filled by "M Day" soldiers; while the "full-timers" are the ones who oversee the day-to-day activities of RC units. You must always balance the day-to-day necessity of coordinating with the "full-timers" with preserving and supporting the chain of command (largely "M Day" soldiers).

You'll also be disabused of many of your preconceived notions regarding the RC. You'll find that many of the popular

myths regarding the Guard/Reserve just aren't true. Far from being "weekend warriors," most are dedicated soldiers who are doing what they do because they honestly love it. Most want to succeed and do the very best job they can. However, just as in the Regular Army, there are some who are in it only for the paycheck. We all must realize that standards of professionalism, conduct, and expertise must be *total* and apply to all components of the Total Force. You, as the AC soldier, will be expected to embody those standards.

The RC gains from your assignment as well. Aside from the obvious benefits of your effort and experience, they'll gain a better understanding of the active component. Some ARNG/USAR soldiers have extremely limited exposure to active duty soldiers and lack an understanding of the reality of the current AC operations and personnel tempos. You'll be able to provide a ready reference for them; as well, you'll be able to personify the "total army."

Your AC/RC assignment will also provide/enhance skills you'll use throughout your career. The first is the ability to be an effective trainer. Any AC/RC assignment will rely on you to either train RC units or their leadership. You'll be expected to be an expert in training management and execution. You'll be expected to be the subject matter expert on your specific area of expertise and be able to apply this knowledge. This will entail some self-development time. You'll have to dig into our doctrine in order to know and apply it. This expertise will directly affect your credibility. They'll check up on what you've told them. And if they find out you're wrong, you'll not be as credible as you need to be.

As well, you'll learn to be an effective staff officer. You'll learn to analyze situations, recognize issues, and form recommended courses of action. You may be rated by an ARNG/USAR "M Day" officer or NCO; these soldiers have full-time jobs/careers and don't have the time to digest a lot of material. They'll rely on you, and your judgment, for the basis of

their decisions. The ability to provide well reasoned, thoughtful staff recommendations will stand you in good stead throughout your career.

Finally, you'll learn how to coordinate. You'll very quickly learn that, with few exceptions, command (in ARNG units) doesn't extend across state boundaries. In my specific situation, my ARNG battalion commander is responsible for all OCS training in a six-state school region. Yet he has command authority over only one company (the company in "his" state, Minnesota). Thus, you'll have to coordinate training/training support activities without the accompanying command and control resources. Principles of staff coordination apply and are integral to your success, both in an AC/RC assignment and in your future assignments.

There will be times and situations when you'll be frustrated. Some you can address, others you cannot. The first is the *lack of command authority*. While no staff officer, in his own right, has any command authority, AC soldiers are used to working for commanders who can delegate the authority we need to do the job. In AC/RC assignments, you may not work for a boss who has that authority. For instance, in my situation, my boss has no command authority over five of "his" companies. You may be assigned to a training support unit and tasked to coordinate training events, but you may not have the authority to "make it happen." The bottom line is that you may find yourself without the authority to match your responsibilities. You'll just have to

do everything in your power to coordinate to the best of your ability.

Finally, you'll see that the "Total Army" isn't yet "total." We're making progress, but we've got a long way to go. Your assignment is critical to making the theory reality. As the Army continues to lose resources and structure, there's a fierce competition for remaining resources. Both active and reserve components are scrambling to "preserve" what they see as their traditional, appropriate missions. As well, neither active nor reserve component seem to have a common understanding of what each component can, and should, do. While this "friction" is declining, it will never go away until we clearly define expectations (standards), missions, and roles. We must have a common set of standards and understand what real, "no kidding" wartime missions will be assigned to RC units to drive training and resourcing. We have to make the hard calls on force structure. Those units without wartime missions should be disbanded. We cannot let our pride in unit lineage and capabilities override a realistic understanding of training and resource constraints.

We also have to understand that each component must compromise to find an agreeable, effective "middle ground." The AC has to realize the complementary and supplementary role of the RC and think outside the box to make every training program, unit organization, and piece of new equipment suitable for the RC as well as the 1st Cavalry Division. The RC needs to realize that you don't always get

what you want; sometimes you just have to salute and accomplish the mission.

Finally, life "away from the flagpole" has its own rewards and frustrations. Life without ready access to exchange/commissary services, military medical care, and post support agencies can make life interesting and challenge a family budget.

In conclusion, there's much to be learned from an AC/RC assignment. You'll gain an understanding and appreciation for the RC training environment, while becoming a better trainer and staff officer. You will have some challenges to overcome; the Total Army isn't "total" yet. On the balance, however, assignment to any type of AC/RC assignment can enhance any soldier's personal and professional life.

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